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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Sculpting the Word

1 In one of his last interviews to Francesco Durante in Rome (April 1978), Raymond Carver made several assertions that shortly afterwards were to acquire a prophetic quality representative of his writing. Chief among them is a sentence that can be looked on as a manifesto of his poetics: "Writing is an act of discovery." This image brings to mind the work of a sculptor striving to reveal, and thereby liberating, the object imprisoned in a block of stone. Ironically enough, Carver's onomastic fate felicitously predisposed him to chisel the surface of language in search ofthe right linguistic *vena* "vein": his name evokes the idea of a sculptor, an engraver, someone wielding a scalpel or some such "extractor."

2 The rhetorical fulcrum of this assumption rests precisely on this *act*, a way of proceeding through which the writing becomes a *discovery*: a vigorous progression through the incrustation of the linguistic Babel that separates the writer from his goal. In order to reach it, he will have to work with scalpels and increasingly sharp chiseling tools. He will do so not for the purpose of enriching the page with verbal arabesques but with the intention of cleansing, removing, and *subtracting*. Only by cutting away at the petrified surface and carving underneath will there emerge in full an intuited yet uncharted territory: a hitherto unknown geography that will transform the journey into a discovery. Thus, from his first collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) onwards, the path Carver follows is that of a neo-realism that cuts to the bone or, as he says himself, to the "marrow." Unwilling to recognize a specific "father" in the many nineteenth-century

American literary archetypes, Carver collects and develops fragments of previous poetics which sometimes recall Gertrude Stein's denotative strain or the extraordinary concision that sets apart the Fitzgerald of *The Great Gatsby* or the Hemingway of the short stories. Carver also excelled at subordinating writing to the mind's "lathe,"in accordance with the "omission" theory, which purposely suppresses every word that is not indispensable. Carver admitted in that Roman interview:

> It's hard to be simple. The language of my stories is the language people commonly speak, but it is also a prose that must be worked on to make it seem transparent. That's not a contradiction in terms. I subject a story to as many as fifteen revisions. The story changes with each of them. But there's nothing automatic; rather, it's a process. Writing is an act of discovery.

3 In his writer's journey, Raymond Carver seems to be constantly guided by two forces: the first abets his desire to force his way into the universe of the short story in order to take part in the development of its renewal in post-war America; the second compels him to look for a change of direction, a personal "act of discovery," safeguarding him from being associated with acknowledged literary movements or pre-established categories. Carver's apprenticeship in writing, which stretches from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, occurs in a country focused on the promotion of the "American way of life" and the strengthening of its own well-being; in a mass culture consuming even more than everything, literature inclusive, but above all, the briefer form such as the short story, which the American public had rediscovered through authors like Saul Bellow or J.D. Salinger. The success of the short story was notably favoured by its transfer from the bookstore shelves to the news stands, as had already occurred with the dime novel, and its wider circulation in several well-known magazines of the time: *The New Yorker*, *Story*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Mademoiselle*, *The Atlantic*, or *Esquire*. Thus, Carver's first contacts with literary classics and small academic reviews occur in a society undergoing an unprecedented leveling in the realm of consumer goods. According to Andy Warhol, this phenomenon is also a sign of democracy:

> What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.

4 By popularizing products in this fashion, the United States was to become the biggest producer of popular icons in other domains as well: advertising (Coca Cola and Campbell Soup), art (Marilyn Monroe), and politics (John and Jacqueline Kennedy). Pop artists were quick to avail themselves of these icons by isolating, assembling, and reproducing them ad infinitum on their canvases. Carver himself will always retain an unconscious archetype of these influences that can be traced back to his adolescence: the enormous refrigerator and the pride of one's own house – unfortunately sold when his family later went through an economic crisis. Such was the popular America that the young Carver wanted to capture in narrative: a mass culture in which, according to Warhol's observations during a trip to California in 1960, Pop Art spreads exponentially as one progresses westward – towards Carver country. It is no coincidence, therefore, that one can trace many of Carver's domestic objects to their pop originals. In fact, as they forcefully emerge from the pages of his tales as unexpectedly strange rather than

traditionally defined, they often reveal a disquieting vision of the American well-being and its concomitant daily myths.

5 Living in the very vortex generated by the boom in consumer products that also affects the short story, Carver experiences its consequences firsthand: he witnesses the birth of a mass of producers, among whom authors whose ranks he himself will swell and whose proliferation is due to the ever-growing spread of *creative writing* classes. In the middle of it all, and owing to its unprecedented appearance into university campuses, the short story publicly questions the mechanisms of its own production and genesis, thereby accepting the pragmatic assumption that one is not simply born a writer but may also become one. It was with this aim in view that Carver set out on a search for masters that would guide him through the labyrinth of language. This explains why he – who said he had never had any familiar or scholarly tools for weighing the difference between a historical novel and a newspaper article – was grateful to John Gardner for teaching him *what* to read before teaching him *how* to write. It is unsurprising, therefore, that shortly afterwards, in his transition from college apprenticeship to the pitiless world of editing, Carver again sought and found other masters, such as Gordon Lish, the editor to whom he owes the publication of his first story in *Esquire*.

6 It was difficult to find new ways of representing the world in this frantic and business-minded America swarming with young authors, creative writing professors, compilers of anthologies such as Martha Foley and her annual *Best American Short Stories*, or review editorslike Gordon Lish. Nevertheless, and this is the other strength of Carver, he managed to make such an impact that he was to say later, in his successful years, "Maybe I've contributed to the resurrection, even in a commercial sense, of the short story, that's all." On each page of his stories Carver began to resolutely sculpt his own difference by keeping away from the trends and the attractive rules of the market as well as by not falling into artistic extremes. Thus he managed to keep at bay the self-reflexive tendency of writers like Donald Barthelme or John Barth(of the postmoderns he says with an almost scornful irony: "What a shame, such an excess of ambition crowned by so little success"), as he also distanced himself from the minimalist style of the younger authors whose strategies were summarily attributed to himself. In fact, he rebelled vigorously against this last definition by critics: "It's been used to tag a number of excellent writers at work today, but I think that's all it is, a tag." According to him it did not carefully distinguish between the ability to photograph minimal segments of life – this is the strategy used by David Leavitt, Amy Hempel, or Susan Minot – and the only seeming simplicity of his own style. The latter is the outcome of a process of rarefaction: it turns out a short form which can safeguard and dominate the immense energy contained in its vaster origins. If in his literary voyage, therefore, Carver appears to be sailing gropingly, intuitively, it is due to the fact that he is, in his own words, "an instinctual writer rather than a writer working out a programme or finding stories to fit particular themes." Far from being a symptom of intellectual precariousness, the above shows all the independence of a writer capable of distancing himself from his masters and of becoming in turn, owing to and in spite of them, a master too. In the end, Raymond Carver has clear ideas: he wants to change storytelling.

7 But what is the form he wanted to revolutionize and by whom had it been codified? It would not be too excessive to say that it is the form of all, including that of a writer headmired and who many believed Carver to have taken as a model: Hemingway. Carver said that he liked Hemingway's first stories and that during his periodic re-readings of

Hemingway's work – he read him every two or three years – he would marvel at the cadence of the sentences, that is to say "not so much *what* he writes about, but rather *the way* he writes."Carver, however, repeatedly asserted his own individuality and difference every time he was compared to this admired yet burdening predecessor:"I don't feel his influence too much, even if I could take it as a compliment to be considered his descendant. Anyway, I don't write fishing stories."In fact, the problem was much more complicated than Carver might have suggested in his fleetinginterviews, since it is seemingly to Hemingway that Carver associated himself. This is already apparent in Carver's use of a piece of dialogue from *Hills Like White Elephants* ("Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?") which he paraphrased into the almost homonymous title *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

8 Nature is still another major force throughout Carver's work. This can be seen through his teenage characters, modeled on his own autobiographical recollections. Lured by fishing trips pregnant with initiatory overtones, they retain in their adult years their preference for the call of rivers and streams over the confined conjugal space. But it is also true that Carver's portrayal of fishing for iridescent trout and salmon in the rivers of the Northwest is totally different from Hemingway's. Indeed, fishing-lines and hand-to-hand combats will not suffice to make of him Hemingway's heir because the distance between him and his predecessor lies not so much in the themes as it does in the writing itself, as Jay McInerney, Carver's pupil at the University of Syracuse, clearly put it:

> Encountering Carver's fiction early in the 1970s was a transforming experience for many writers of my generation, an experience perhaps comparable to discovering Hemingway's sentences in the twenties. In fact, Carver's language was unmistakably like Hemingway's – the simplicity and clarity, the repetitions, the nearly conversational rhythms, the precision of physical description. But Carver completely dispensed with the romantic egoism that made the Hemingway idiom such an awkward model for other writers in the late twentieth century. The *cafés* and *pensions* and battlefields of Europe were replaced by trailer parks and apartment complexes, the glamorous occupations by dead-end jobs. The trout in Carver's streams were apt to be pollution-deformed mutants. The good *vin du pays* was replaced by cheap gin, the romance of drinking by the dull grind of full-time alcoholism. Some commentators found his work depressing for these reasons. For many young writers, it was terribly liberating.

On the Brink of Catastrophe

9 In the affluent American society, where the *pop* phenomenon – be it involuntary as in the world of advertising, or conscious through artists who appropriate it – emphasizes in various ways the icons and myths of a new lifestyle, Raymond Carver chooses to write about the other side of these myths and icons. Set in the America of reassuring household appliances, of advertisements that praise waste, and of a television industry that homogenizes the masses, Carver's stories expose the other side of the nation: the marginal America of junk collectors, of the new poor excluded from the story of the winners and the rules of official economy or carefully silenced and covered up by the media "under the smoothsurface of things." This is a peripheral America of towns too small not to be swallowed up by the overwhelming and nameless expanses of the countryside; an America peopled by lower-middle class whites otherwise known as "white trash"; an America where furniture and household items are thrown out of the one-time Disney-like cottageslike teeth from rotten gums; where cult technological objects and

household appliances take on a parallel life of their own. In the midst of all this, human beings – be they married or having recovered their pre-marital independence – are effective carriers of a vague sense of loss. Paralyzed and prey to the "tension" of "something [that] is imminent," they invoke a silence that immediately resonates as artificial and theatrical ("will you please be quiet, please?"), or else they plod from one page to the next, entangled in minimal narrative markers: "he said," "she said," "he answered."

10 When Carver's first collections appeared[1], the stories induced in the reader a surprising and notable shock of recognition. Indeed, Carver's fiction immediately strikes us as postmodern insofar as it is pregnant with the impression that modernity's certainties are about to collapse, if they have not already done so; and that there exists a multiple flipside to the American coin that in fact conceals a void: there's an empty reverse of well-being and empty counterparts of optimism, family, and love. Assailed and nonplussed by this feeling of void which arises from a sense of loss and uprootedness, Carver's characters seem incapable of recording and understanding the "great events" of contemporary American history.They can only witness it in their low, albeit cozy blue-collar existence; they are the survivors of the past and at the same time the disillusioned heralds for the generations to come. We can picture them as representatives of the stereotypical teenagers of the Cold War, as well as of a spreading conformity that touches the family and sexuality; on the one hand they are lured by the illusive new urban frontier of the suburb, and on the other they are cowed by the fear of the atomic era. We can imagine them as young and full of vigor, sallying forth toward new and culturally unexplored frontiers, yet soon disillusioned with the American dream that collapses on war fronts in Southeast Asia or under the lies of Watergate. We can even picture them as fathers, mothers, spouses quickly turned single, or born-again Christians attracted to the utopia of the open market while simultaneously being struck down by its nefarious aspects, by the dark side of Reagan's America. Those who had once committed suicide for fear of the atomic bomb are now doing so because of economic or ethnic problems, undesired pregnancy, or because of a simplistic equation between homosexuality and AIDS. The disaster is so widespread that it hides its face behind the upbeat façade of the affluent society; it is so ineffable that Carver prefers to interiorize it rather than to voice it, thereby offering us characters bearing within them a sense of void and loss which is simultaneously personal as well as collective.

11 This loss can manifest itself disquietingly through identity crises, as in "The Father," where the eponymous character resembles the newborn son, according to the snickers of the sisters, who later claim that the same father "doesn't look like *anybody!*"It may also reveal itself through a couple's mourning over a lost love which, mysteriously sublimated at the oniric level, suddenly surfaces as in the dreams of the protagonist in "Fat," or revisited through the Faulknerian theme of incest between a brother and sister, as in *Furious Seasons*. It can also unleash itself in the voyeurism of "The Idea," and even in "Neighbors," where it takes the shape of an irrepressible impulse to put on the lingerie of the absent neighbor. The loss can also assume more drastic forms such as that of disembodiment in "Viewfinder," where a character with hooks instead of hands and a Polaroid slung around his neck does his best to sell owners the pictures he has taken of their houses.

12 Whatever the meaning of these losses, their common denominator is an *expectation*, a *tension* ever projected towards what Carver calls "a sense that something is

imminent,"and which is in fact already a catastrophe. The fact that it later does not explode completely nor resolve in a catharsis brings about this subsequent feeling of tension and paralysis that stems from a denied resolution. This is what happens in "The Student's Wife," in which a young wife and mother of two, inexplicably spends a sleepless night listening expectantly to the sound of cars passing outside. When dawn breaks, the return of light after an interminable night does not restore order; and while "the pale sheets whitened grossly before her eyes," the wife of the student, whom the genitive strips of any specific identity, falls down on her knees crying "God, will you help us, God?" But how can help be offered to a person who fails to express clearly his own disease?

13 Carver's protagonists, in fact, are faithful to the unequivocal request for silence, to the idea of "be[ing] quiet"; they explain nothing, or almost nothing, of their own torment – about which very little is ever asked. In this brief and extraordinary account, in fact, the student, narcissistic to the point that he believes he can fight off his wife's insomnia first with a page from Rilke, then with a sandwich and finally by massaging her legs and shoulders, eventually alienates himself and falls into a speechless slumber. The reader then, hedged in between two walls of silence – that of the husband's sleep and of the wife's despair at his bedside – sees himself invested with the task of understanding the reasons behind his uneasiness and of bridging the rarefied gap, the abyss in which the relationship between the two has snapped forever.

14 In cases where, unlike the above, the possibility to know the protagonists' past or present exists, it may come about not through direct revelations but through *other* characters, much more omniscient, and between whom the protagonists themselves vicariously nestle, thereby setting up an unusual mental ventriloquism. In "Why, Honey?" for instance, the dangerous side of the son, a sometimes cruel and now a corrupt and unscrupulous adult, is exposed by the mother, who hides and lives in fear of being found out by him. In "Viewfinder" it is the revealing sentence of the photographer without hands but with penetrating intuition ("So they just up and left you, right?") which reveals the fact that the protagonist was abandoned by his wife and children. The mystifying title of "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" is elucidated when a gimlet-eyed postman reads the mind of the person he hands a letter to: "Why don't you forget her? Why don't you go to work and forget her?"

15 We can also learn more about the characters' lives by examining how Carver uses classic tools like the objective correlative to elucidate the present and watch out for the future. In "Are These Actual Miles?" for instance, the family automobile, which is sold by the wife at an unfathomable price and disappears that same night with its new owner, becomes the tangible sign of a marital life that similarly vanishes forever, as the original owners will never again confront a financial problem *together*. Finally, it is once again the hooks replacing the hands on the photographer's stumps in "Viewfinder" that tell us we are about to enter a household which has been irreversibly maimed in its emotional life. But this rhetorical instrument is at its most touching in stories where the main characters are men in the powerful yet fragile age of initiation. In "Nobody Said Anything," the big fish dismembered by the boy in order to give half of it to his fishing companion and then triumphantly brought to the quarrelling and disinterested parents, seems a clear symptom of the family's imminent dismembering. In "Dummy" (later "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off"), Carver's most "aphasic" story, it is again a child who sees the

violent death of old Dummy, a sort of "freak" singled out by his unintelligible idiolect, as an anticipation of the father's disease and death.

16 The objective correlative can also be an action that succeeds in breaking the stasis. In these instances we are often confronted with a violence that is all the stronger for its unexpectedness. The apex of violence is reached in "Mine" (later "Little Things"), in which a young couple about to break up fight over the right to keep the child that the woman is clutching in her arms. The case is "solved" in Solomon-like fashion through a sequence consisting less of words than increasingly animated actions stylized like the movements of a new martial art. This is one of Carver's shortest accounts as well as that in which maximum havoc is wreaked within a limited diegetic space, in a scant number of replies. It is also symptomatic of how Carver's expressive minimalism, his economically intense style, transforms Hemingway's omission into a language of the highest density.

17 Violence can also arise from the return of the repressed, which sometimes finds an allegorical representation of itself in nature. In "Distance"(later, "Everything Stuck to Him"), the evocation of a storm that occurred several years earlier and is now shattering the night serves to disclose the latent aggressivity in a young married couple whose freedom is restricted by the presence of their child. It also serves to unmask before our eyes the hypocrisy underlying the rather sentimental relationship of the characters today: the father himself and the now grown and "distant" daughter. In "So Much Water So Close to Home," the account of an outing by four men who end up fishing in the same waters in which floats the body of a strangled woman, gives voice to a marital violence that the couple seems to want to oust from their daily life but which is always there. In "Tell the Women We Are Going," Jerry, a young husband who "stared all the time and hardly did any talking at all," represents a similar case. Troubled by the explosion of erotic impulses smothered for too long under the roles of husband and father, he inexplicably stones to death two girls on a bicycle ride. Here again, Carver introduces the return of the repressed in an oblique way, through the description of the scenery which serves as backdrop for this brutal scene, and which is entirely made of hard, implacable rocks colored with graffiti. Slogans such as "Repent now" or "Jesus saves," signs of the religious rebirth in postwar America, along with ones like "Beat Yakima" are different allegories of the same violence. Robert Altman, the director of "Short Cuts" who devised a way of linking the "exemplary" quality of this narrative with the allegorical character of Carverian nature, ends the story with an earthquake as Jerry is grabbing a stone, both devices brilliantly signaling the return of the repressed and the ineffability of the crime.

Domestic Interiors, Objects, Visionary Settings

18 "There is definitely a change going on in my writing and I'm glad of it. It happened when I wrote the story "Cathedral." What Carver said of the title story of his 1983 collection applies in fact to all that he wrote following *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, the volume with which he achieved his first success in 1981. In the wake of success came also a throng of imitative followers – something he had not asked for – who readily held Carver as a model for the country's numerous creative writing classes. It must be said that Carver's comments on this presumed change were not always unambiguous. In fact, they were often contradictory, as were the remarks of the critics, divided between those who viewed 1983 as a turning point in the author's style and those who did not.

19 Carver would say that in the stories of *Cathedral*, "although characters were stronger, things still didn't go much better for them."At other times he would emphatically assert that these stories were "stronger, better developed, and with more hope." What is certain is that Carver wished to take a path that was more complex, both on the thematic level as well as on form. He imposed new imperatives, felt the need for a sort of *volano* "fly-wheel" that dispenses with restrictive formulas, with theory, but which would still allow the story to stretch and project itself into the "outside" of the characters. Carver now wanted the short story not merely to offer itself as a rarefied cluster of tensions or unarticulated expectations that remain "inside" the character but to open up and thereby stimulate in both reader and characters the vision of *another* world.

20 Supporting itself on new pillars, "buttresses" this time, involved a rethinking of its architectonics and structure. This explains why the word *architecture* started to crop up in his interviews. In a way, such interviews are occasional documents – much less meditated than the essays and reviews that are to be found in our *Meridiano*, but this is precisely why they are so revealing. It was in one of these interviews given in 1984 that Carver, drawing on his beloved Flaubert, cites a letter in which the French master beseeches his editor not to serialize an expurgated *Madame Bovary* by arguing that "Prose must stand upright from one end to the other, like a wall whose ornamentation continues down to its very base." "Prose is architecture." Two years later Carver repeated Flaubert's sentence, adding to it a meaningful twist:"prose is architecture," and these are not "baroque" times.

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21 This was the turning point in Carver's career: 1983, the *annus mirabilis* of *Fires* and *Cathedral* the year in which the two streams in Carver merged to create a watershed. Actually, this reflection in architectural, constructive and structural terms which did not betoken an arid imagination but, on the contrary, a new vision, could be seen in an earlier interview of 1982, when the collections were still in process. Affirming the writer's claim to use "advice [from] someone you trust," Carver said: "This is a farfetched analogy, but it's in a way like building a fantastic cathedral. The main thing is to get the work of art together. You don't know who built those cathedrals, but they're there." Uttered in the years when Carver's distance from Gordon Lish was solidifying but had not yet reached its later polemical phase, this sentence is worth quoting because it was used to round off a long disquisition on the persona and role of the editor in a writer's life – from Hemingway to Fitzgerald, from Ezra Pound to T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. We have to take a larger view of this sentence's implications because it is articulated around an aesthetic nexus of paramount importance: it shows that Carver accepted and shared, during his formative years, Gordon Lish's minimalist vision and possessed himself of its precise instruments. He accepted and shared a style reduced to its minimum, rarefied, and at the same time pregnant with the words it leaves out.

22 With time, his "instinctual writer's" energy and imaginative distance would make him realize, during the journey from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* to *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, that this iconic style whose surgical economy strips to the bone and to which he owed his success, also had him skirting a narrative "degree zero" beyond which it was impossible to proceed. He therefore felt the need to explore the opposite direction: that of a fuller, more generous expression without succumbing to a certain postmodernist "baroque" which he did not adopt. He did this in 1983 with the publication of such stories

as "Harry's Death," "The Pheasant," "Where Is Everyone?" all of which he inserts in *Fires* and, especially, with the twelve stories of *Cathedral*. In other words, just as he accepted the challenge of minimalist rarefaction, Carver now accepts the challenge of going beyond this minimalism and the difficult task it entailed of taking his distance from Lish. The latter, in turn, was able to also gracefully distance himself from a more mature Carver who was eager to tread new paths on his own. This eventually led Carver to restore in his 1988 anthology *Where I'm Calling From*, containing what he considered his best work, the original length of the stories that Lish had reduced, often by half.

23 This decision revealed the artistic and poetical shift undergone by Carver during these years; he started to follow a different technique for sharpening and eradicating the superfluous word. It would be reductive to read this change in light of the events in his life (i.e. a more self-assured Carver settling down in his post-alcoholism years; the prominence of the "strong" Tess Gallagher) or in terms of an aesthetic revolt against an intrusive editor. The opening of Carver's artistic prospects in the 80s was such that both versions of these stories can coexist within the same canon and present an equal level of excellence. As Carver often said when talking of his frequent rewrites and revisions, this coexistence is possible because these are *different* stories ("they are all different stories, and they have to be judged differently,"he told the critic William Stull in 1987). Distinguishing them, however, implies an obvious shift in focus. "The Bath" is a case in point. In its 1981 version, the short one advocated by Lish, the reader's attention is drawn to the symbolic and salutary bathing performed by the mother of a dying child whose fate is, apparently, not worth troubling about. In its 1988 version, marked by a shift in Carver's sensitivity, a return to the original manuscript's length, and the new title "A Small, Good Thing," the story draws the reader's attention to the final catharsis achieved through the eating of small sweet rolls, as in an ancient burial ritual. In this version it is important to show that the child is dead and that his toys and useless birthday cake are relics from another life. Seen from this different angle, the little bread rolls offered by a tenacious baker during the night become a tender metaphor of life rarelyconveyed by a short story. "'A Small, Good Thing' and 'The Bath' are really two different stories," Carver repeats to Kasia Body in 1987. Thus, in light of the author's own words, the rest – from the disquisitions on the real paternity of Carver's minimalism to the attempts (not authorized, it seems, by Tess Gallagher) at critical reconstructions of the texts edited by Lish – is reduced to mere polemics by Carver's firm position in the canon of twentieth-century American literature.

24 Turning back to the texts, what the reader will not fail to notice in the collections following *What We Talk About* is the different tone in Carver's prose. As Carver himself acknowledged, there has occurred a shift from the asphyxiating "him and her" to the ampler "family relations" that project towards the surrounding landscape. In an interview from that same year, 1983, and in the wake of the enthusiastic reception of *Cathedral* by the critics, an enraptured Carver asserted:

> There is an opening-up in this book that there's not been in any of the other books. There was a period of several months when I didn't write anything. And then the first story that I wrote was *Cathedral*, which is unlike anything I have ever done before. All the stories in this book are fuller and more interesting, somehow. They are more generous. They are not quite so pared down.

25 This is unquestionably true of the stories both in *Fires* and *Cathedral*. "Opening-up"then (Carver's words to Kay Bonetti suggest the cracking of a code) means writing in different ways; it also means *rewriting* or retracing one's steps. In fact, a large part of the 80s is

characterized not only by its "original" writing style but also by an unending process of revising and rewriting of previously published works. It is to this process that we owe the protean and unique Carver canon made up of stories with variable lengths, with modifications in the names of one or more characters, and with various titles. This trend would abate only towards the end of the decade, which coincided with the author's death. Consequently, the label "original" would be applied to the stories from his last collection, *Elephant and Other Stories*, and to the unpublished ones recovered among his papers and included in *Call If You Need Me*.

26 The opening-up may also be triggered, in a more general sense, by glimpses into a different life or, what Carver himself liked to call, a "second life": that which came after the difficult beginnings, the economic problems, the break up of the first marriage, and, most importantly, the addiction to alcohol. Opening up, then, means including other personal experiences or, as Carver prefers to say, other "obsessions"into his writing: "There are certain obsessions that I have and try to give voice to: the relationships between men and women, why we oftentimes lose the things we put the most value on, the mismanagement of our own inner resources. I'm also interested in survival, what people can do to raise themselves up when they've been laid low."It is not a question here of autobiographical writing, something Carver always refused to do, but of drawing new incentives from personal experience and transforming them into new narrative *obsessions* . It is no coincidence, therefore, that many of the collections in Carver's "second life" present characters that measure themselves against the "mismanagement of our own inner resources" characterized by alcoholism and the ordeal of coming out of it. This is obvious in "Where Is Everyone?" in which a husband and wife who had previously broken up alternatively attend the sessions of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is also noticeable, in stories of *Cathedral* such as "Careful," in the feeling of neurosis and impotence that an alcoholic husband experiences as he struggles to remove impacted earwax. This motif has a distant echo in the early story "The Hair," where a hair stuck between the protagonist's teeth almost drives him mad. We see instances of this wasting of one's life in "Where I'm Calling From," which takes place in the gloomy Christmas atmosphere of a community of alcoholics; in "Chef's House," when a couple seek to find a lost balance through the husband's recovered sobriety. It emerges again in "Kindling," one of the previously unpublished and posthumous stories from *Call If You Need Me*, where still another alcoholic divorcee spends a few days in the rented room of an outlying American town.

27 It is not surprising therefore that in these writings by a more mature Carver in which there are no longer any children or adolescents, one of the important themes or "obsessions" should be a more complex communicative ritual around which the life of the couple is being articulated: this life of the couple unfolds within a domestic space that becomes an active part of the narration. As is characteristic of American culture, the event evolves in space more than it does in time, a space which can only be described but that provides the diegetic thread of the story. It is the synchronic coexistence of the objects that fill the home – a home that extends to the garden and neighboring spaces – which indicates the passing of time in personal and collective affairs. The married couple nestle in this space and find, through discussion, a sign of their own existence that will bear witness to their own duration in time or take stock of their failures.

28 Thus, there are married couples who felicitously recover their lost equilibrium inside the space of another, as in "Chef's House," where they also risk losing that balance when Chef and his daughter, "fat Linda," regain possession of it. Other couples succeed in

maintaining it within the impersonal space of an institution for Alcoholics, as in "Where I'm Calling From." There are still others to whom it is not vouchsafed to enjoy the blessing of a lasting relationship, as is the case in "Call If You Need Me." In this story, the narrator and his wife Nancy fail, in spite of their well-organized plan, to recreate their shattered universe. Finally, some couples are affected by a stasis that welds time to the space of a room, as in "Preservation," where the protagonist, after being fired, decides to "move" on the household couch. Similarly affected are large families that tend to absorb the space of others, as in "Elephant," where the relatives ask for attention, affection, and above all, infinite supplies of cash.

29 One can observe still another characteristic: when couples are irrevocably reduced from two to one, the survivors may attach themselves, vampire-like, to the life-space of another couple, while still clinging to their own. This could already be seen in "Why Don't You Dance?" from the 1981 collection of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, the story in which the protagonist, single again, projects himself into the life of a young couple who will probably acquire the bed and furniture scattered about the front lawn of his house. Similarly, in "Boxes,"the solitude and neurosis of the old mother who has just turned single are filtered by the couple of the son and daughter-in-law. The same occurs in "Fever," where the protagonist has the illusion that he has retrieved the warmth of a shattered family in the harmonious couple of the old, motherly babysitter and her husband. The same phenomenon recurs still in "Kindling," where the protagonist, Myers, seeks to recreate the family that alcohol took away from him through Sol and his "fat" wife, the owners of the room he is renting. This projecting is valid also in cases where the couple or neo-singles eventually shut themselves up inside the house, as in "Careful," or in a train car, as in "The Compartment" or "The Train." The characters in these stories try to communicate, to dialog with the surrounding space, a domestic space that is a synecdoche of the American space.

30 In this "architectural" reconsideration of narrative space which Carver uses to conjure up the vision of an *other* world there are, besides the familiar structures of landscape architecture typically found in suburbs (lawns, swimming pools), other important elements, albeit secondary ones, ranging from animals to objects. It is upon these – which disclose nothing of their past, as in a Greek tragedy deprived of a prologue, and which have no prospect of a salutary projection into the future – that falls the task of "historicizing" the general architectonics of the narration, thereby offering us a reading made of narrative bits and pieces that would otherwise remain obscure.

31 The animals are no longer the iridescent trout of initiation or the mouse with disquieting eyes in "What's in Alaska?" They are the Orphic beings that belong to an exotic and alien bestiary. In "The Pheasant," (*Fires*) the protagonist runs over one of them as it unexpectedly crosses the road at night, shattering one of the lights as "it spun up past the windshield, trailing feathers and a stream of shit." The sight of this beautiful animal, whose death is evinced only by its unnatural presence on the asphalt and a stain of blood at the mouth, evokes in the driver the vision of a different world. "How well do you really know me?" Gerald asks the girl traveling at his side, and shortly after that everything precipitates, as he comes to the realization, horrified, "that he no longer had any values, no frame of reference," and that he had accelerated in order to kill. Later, in the parking lot of the first restaurant, he steps out of the car and sets out by himself on the edge of the road under the scrutiny of the waiters. The *vision* triggered by this death also enables us to follow up the thread – and the void – of his former life. In "Feathers," the story that

opens *Cathedral*, a couple invited over by friends has to put up with a peacock that announces itself with an "awful squall" in the garden and later roams, voluminous, around the dinner table. Years later everything will change in Jack and Fran's life, but the memory of this inexplicable vision remains.

32 In "Blackbird Pie" (*Elephant and Other Tales*) and the posthumous "Call If You Need Me," two stories inexplicably connected through the presence of the same animal, the two crisis-ridden couples experience an analogous epiphany as they walk out of the garden and find themselves in the presence of horses coming out of nowhere."I put my hand against the horse's neck and felt a surge of power run up my arm to the shoulder," one reads in the first story. "I felt helpless, but I was scared, too. 'Can you tell me what's going on?.... What's that suitcase doing on the front porch? Where did these horses come from?'.... 'I'm leaving you,' she said. 'That's what's happening. I'm heading for town tonight. I'm striking out on my own.'" In the second story too, as horses flock into the garden from nowhere, they re-order the events and feelings that marked the couple's life.

> They were big white horses with long manes.... But nervous, too.... Their ears kept rising and falling as they tore out clumps of grass.... "We won't forget that," she said. She began to cry.... *Go, dearest one, and God be with you*.... I drove back to the house and parked in the driveway and looked at the hoofprints of the horses from last night. There were deep impressions in the grass...

33 In Carver's writings, objects also have particular potentialities. They are not the simple daily things over which our mind's eye skims. In the form of barbecues, chainsaws, or lawnmowers, they too can project themselves onto the external world. Their presence is even more disquieting when they populate the inside of a house; the more claustrophobic the space of the house, the stronger their voice and the stupor it creates. For instance, as the refrigerator in "Preservation" unexpectedly breaks down, it turns from a jewel of domestic progress into a *morgue* that turns out decomposing matter and carcasses, thus becoming an intrusive narrative element. Similarly, the TV set in "Where Is Everyone?" which startles awake the protagonist who has returned to live with his mother, exposes the unease within: "I woke up with a start, the pajamas damp with sweat. A snowy light filled the room. There was a roaring coming at me. The room clamored. I lay there. I didn't move."

34 More than any other appliance or communicative medium, the telephone, always ringing out of anyone's control, becomes an enigma which lends itself to multiple readings. In "A Small, Good Thing" it arouses the irrepressible anxiety of the dying Scotty's mother; in "Are These Actual Miles?" every ring marks a step in the distance the wife is taking from her husband; in "So Much Water So Close to Home," it reveals the rough sensibility of the husbands on their fishing trip; and the telephone which rings by mistake in "Whoever Was Using This Bed" sets off the couple's first meditation on the drama of an irreversible coma. Most disquieting also is that of "Are You A Doctor?" for it succeeds in drawing the character *away* from his domestic space into *another* space, from which he will emerge forever changed: "'Are you there, Arnold?' she said. 'You don't sound like yourself.'"

35 If many of these objects are moved from their canonical place, if they are not only isolated and set off, as they usually are in pop art, but are also *misplaced* and decontextualized, they take on another disconcerting quality. This is illustrated by the bridle, an emblem of domination, abandoned or perhaps forgotten by passing tenants in the eponymic story: "The rider pulls the reins this way and that, and the horse turns. It's simple." Likewise, in "Feathers," the plaster cast of a young woman's teeth carefully

preserved and placed on the TV set serves as a reminder of her recovered beauty and...of her dentist's skill: "There were no lips to the awful-looking thing, and no jaw either, just these old plaster teeth packed into something that resembled thick yellow gums." These objects can also remain indecipherable and mysterious, as in Carver's extraordinary last story, "Errand." There, the cork of the champagne bottle from which Chekhov drank before dying lies on the floor until one of the hotel bellboys furtively pockets it the next morning. We are given no explanation, but this amiable young man's gesture, a gesture completely futile in comparison with the delicate task Olga Chekhov is entrusting him with, stands out with amazing vividness in the reader's mind.

36 In "Cathedral," Carver's most Orphic and visionary story in which the protagonist reluctantly at first helps a blind person draw a cathedral by guiding his hand, the *vision* of an *other* world is finally restorative and cathartic, as he also, in a reversal of roles and assisted by the blind man who asked him to close his eyes, draws one himself. The "blindness" to which the protagonist submitted has thus, like an ancient retaliation, liberated him from the phenomenology of domestic life as it has also disrupted its old borders manifest in the asphyxiating confines of the TV screen, the claustrophobic limits of the house, and the invisible limits of the conjugal trap. Guided towards "blindness" by a blind man, the character finally achieves self-consciousness, like Oedipus in the woods of Colonus.

37 Between the rarefied realism of the first collection and the visionary realism of the last lies the evolution of Raymond Carver – and with it an extremely significant portion of the twentieth-century American short story. Carver was a great narrator because he knew how to transgress and rise above any theory – an outlaw capable of writing up new laws. He sought masters, from John Gardner to Gordon Lish, so as to learn not to imitate them, and he knew how to expand the confines of American realism in order to take it to the unmapped territories of a visionary. He unveiled to us an anonymous and marginal America that no one knew, conferring to her the immortality of an *epos*.

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